

NJS Presents

Teaching NJ History

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The Flu Epidemic of 1918 in Paterson: A Retrospective**By Fazli Hida and Veronica MacDonald Ditko****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v8i2.289>**

More than 100 years ago, a pandemic gripped the state of New Jersey—the Spanish influenza. This article is a narrative of events described in Paterson, New Jersey, newspapers at that time. The authors have refrained from drawing parallels to modern times; however, readers will notice the 1918 events carried elements of denial, hysteria, anger, randomness, loss of income, and profound grief that readers can no doubt relate to today. The article is modeled after the amazing Influenza Archive created by the University of Michigan’s Center for the History of Medicine (influenzaarchive.org). The authors highly recommend a visit to this website to see how the flu affected other areas around the country. As readers will see, this article is also a case study in the meaningful scholarship that can be created by students during internships.

As a man lay sick in bed, a panic began to grip the city of Paterson. It was September 21, 1918. Ben Mawhinney was so ill, his doctors lost hope.¹ It was “the dreaded disease that is now endangering the lives of thousands of men in the military,” the *Paterson Evening News* article reported.

What was killing Ben Mawhinney was unlike any disease previously; he had been sick for only six days. It was not a long-lived illness like tuberculosis or polio. As his Paterson-based family

¹ “Local Boy Dying of Influenza,” *Paterson Evening News*, September 21, 1918.

surrounded his bedside, the young naval officer was in the final grips of the dreaded Spanish influenza at Camp Dix (Fort Dix today) in Pemberton Township, New Jersey.

In fact, Camp Dix became a major source of the “flu” in New Jersey in September 1918.² It registered among the highest number of new cases (803) at all training camps on September 26.³ Thousands of men had been called up⁴ (or rounded up if they dodged the draft⁵) to train for what would be the tail end of World War I (WWI). Many of those men would never go overseas—they died in the Camp Dix hospital.⁶ Officials quarantined everyone at the campsite. But the quarantine came too late for some.

On September 23, Surgeon General Rupert Blue urged the American public to not “underrate” the disease. Twenty percent of Europeans were ill.⁷ In response, the Paterson Health Department issued a notice to the city’s people with facts regarding the unfamiliar malady. The source of infection was identified as “the secretions from the nose, throat, and respiratory passages,” with an incubation period of “one to four days, generally two.”⁸

Before the quarantine took full effect, two soldiers from Camp Dix arrived in Paterson around September 24—Frank Alber and George Titmus.⁹ Both became sick. The *Paterson Evening News* noted, however, that doctors had a rosy outlook on the pandemic. “The public is obeying the health rules [sic] by the Board of Health yesterday, it seems, and with the coming of cold weather, shortly, the danger of the sickness making headway here will be entirely eliminated,”

² Alex J. Navarro and Howard Markel, editors, “The America Influenza Epidemic of 1918–1919: A digital encyclopedia. Newark, New Jersey,” Michigan Center for the History of Medicine and Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, <https://www.influenzaarchive.org/cities/city-newark.html#>. Accessed September 23, 2021.

³ “Influenza Has Hold on Country,” *Paterson Morning Call*, September 26, 1918.

⁴ “Call 250 Men for Camp Dix for October 7,” *Paterson Evening News*, September 17, 1918.

⁵ “99 Draft Evaders Sent to Fort Dix,” *Paterson Evening News*, September 4, 1918.

⁶ “6 Local Men in Service Dead of Influenza,” *Paterson Evening News*, October 3, 1918.

⁷ “Health Board Acts to Halt Influenza,” *Paterson Evening News*, September 23, 1918.

⁸ “Health Board Acts to Halt Influenza,” *Paterson Evening News*, September 23, 1918.

⁹ “Another Case of Influenza Located Here,” *Paterson Evening News*, September 24, 1918.

the *Paterson Evening News* article said. “As a precautionary measure Camp Dix has been quarantined.”¹⁰

Other military installations were breeding grounds for infection too. A man who was stationed at the Newport Naval Training Station in Rhode Island, Gugler Pirolo, died of the flu, as reported on September 25.¹¹ He was a noted bugler for the navy. Pirolo’s illness had progressed from a slight cold to a serious infection of both his lungs and liver. On September 28, Naval Petty Officer Arthur Mullane died aboard a hospital ship docked in south Brooklyn.¹² He had taken ill one week prior. Mullane was 17 years old. Inch by inch, the flu crept closer to and invaded northern New Jersey.¹³

The disease spread through the Caldwell Rifle Range near Newark in late September.¹⁴ The range, built in 1918, spanned 4,000 acres on what is now Big Piece Camp in Fairfield. It was the largest marksmanship facility in the world at the time, with 100 targets and lots of soldiers passing through on their way to WWI in Europe.¹⁵ Then 75 soldiers stationed at three shipyards in the Newark area fell ill. “Pneumonia” also had an uptick in Newark at the time, before medical professionals realized it was the flu. Looking back, Newark likely had around 400 cases at that time.¹⁶

Some 600 people at Camp Merritt in Cresskill were ill by October 2. Sixty-five of them did not survive, according to the *Paterson Evening News*. To diminish the spread of the disease, every Red Cross branch in Bergen County was ordered to deliver face masks to the camp.¹⁷

¹⁰ “Another Case of Influenza Located Here,” *Paterson Evening News*, September 24, 1918.

¹¹ “3 New Cases of Influenza Reported Here,” *Paterson Evening News*, September 25, 1918.

¹² “Arthur Mullane Dies Aboard Ship,” *Paterson Evening News*, September 28, 1918.

¹³ “No New Cases of Influenza,” *Paterson Evening News*, September 26, 1918; “20 new cases,” *Paterson Evening News*, September 30, 1918.

¹⁴ Navarro and Markel.

¹⁵ Beverly Crifasi, “Throwback Thursday: Caldwell Rifle Range,” *The Progress*, March 26, 2017.

¹⁶ Navarro and Markel.

¹⁷ “600 Cases at Camp Merritt,” *Paterson Evening News*, October 2, 1918.



Demonstration at the Red Cross Emergency Ambulance Station in Washington, DC, 1918. Courtesy Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/npsc.18662/>.

Then another Paterson man training at Camp Dix fell ill and died. This time it was William J. Colligan, the beloved husband of Jennie (Chapman) Colligan. His death was registered on October 3.¹⁸ The Paterson Health Board said symptoms included violent sneezing/coughing, advised giving up smoking during the illness, and recommended washing hands thoroughly with soap and water after being in public places.¹⁹ Paterson health officials also took certain measures to stem the overwhelming tide of influenza. First, the Paterson Board of Health, through Dr. William Neer, requested that all practicing physicians submit daily reports on the number of flu cases they saw, or face a \$50 fine (\$900 in today's money).²⁰ Hints of masking measures appeared in the papers. While the *Paterson Evening News* did not mention public mandates, masks were, as noted above, sent to certain people and places, especially military camps under quarantine.

By October 2, the *Paterson Evening News* was reporting the randomness of the disease. Even within families, there was often no telling who would get it and who wouldn't, who would

¹⁸ "Died. COLLIGAN," *Paterson Morning Call*, October 7, 1918.

¹⁹ "Health Board Acts to Halt Influenza," *Paterson Evening News*, September 23, 1918.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

survive and who wouldn't. Young Rea (or Rae) Cohen, age 17 and a socialite, died from the flu. "Miss [Rea/Rae] Cohen is the daughter of the well-known silk manufacturer, and she was very popular in Jewish circles in this city," the *Paterson Evening News* article declared.²¹ Her brother Samuel was next; however, he died of flu-related pneumonia.²² Their mother Rose became ill too, but she survived.²³

The flu continued its spread.²⁴ A married Hawthorne couple, James Tilley Jr. and Stella M. Tilley, died from the Spanish Flu around October 4, according to the *Morning Call*. Their newborn child was ill as well and not expected to survive.²⁵



Mrs. Brown in the clutches of influenza, 1918. Courtesy Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/anrc.02548/>.

²¹ "Brother and Sister Dead of Influenza," *Paterson Evening News*, October 2, 1918.

²² Ibid.

²³ "New Jersey State Census, 1915," FamilySearch, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:QV97-BTZ8>. Accessed February 23, 2022. "Samuel Cohen in household of Ruben Cohen, Paterson, 5 ward, 4 district, Passaic, New Jersey, United States," citing sheet #12B, household 293, line #92, New Jersey State Library, Trenton; FHL microfilm 1,465,555. "United States Census, 1920," FamilySearch, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:M4YZ-5G2>. Accessed February 2, 2021. Rosa Cohen in entry for Reuben Cohen, 1920.

²⁴ "5 More Deaths as Influenza Gains in City," *Paterson Evening News*, October 4, 1918.

²⁵ "Deaths," *Paterson Evening News*, October 5, 1918; "Influenza Spreads Here – Whole Families Stricken with Disease. The Tilley Family," *Paterson Morning Call*, October 4, 1918.

On October 5, the Paterson Board of Education (BOE) reported it would fumigate the schools once a week, and officials recommended the same in homes. Little did the BOE know, the Paterson Board of Health decided that same day to formally limit public gatherings and ordered public schools, theaters, saloons, stores, and cinemas to be closed indefinitely.²⁶ The Board of Health was reacting to the 600 cases of influenza in the city of Paterson, and approximately 100 new cases reported on the morning of October 5 alone. Public buildings were also planned to be fumigated weekly.

Also on October 5, public drinking cups in Paterson were banned. "Warning was issued yesterday by the health officer against the use of drinking cups in public places, no matter of what nature at this time."²⁷ Communion services at churches that weekend were in question. By October 8, the circuit court, the court of common pleas, and the district court were all closed.²⁸ While most places of business began to obey the public-gathering ban, the Board of Health's secretary, Tunis Kievitt, sent a telegram to federal health officials requesting anti-influenza vaccinations under orders from Dr. William Neer.²⁹

Medical personnel were not immune to the disease. Many nurses fell ill at Barnert and General Hospitals in Paterson around October 10.³⁰ A beloved annual event, the Liberty Day parade, was postponed.³¹ It was set to happen on October 12. Newspaper accounts did not specify the new date.

²⁶ "Authorities Act to Halt Dreaded Flu," *Paterson Evening News*, October 5, 1918.

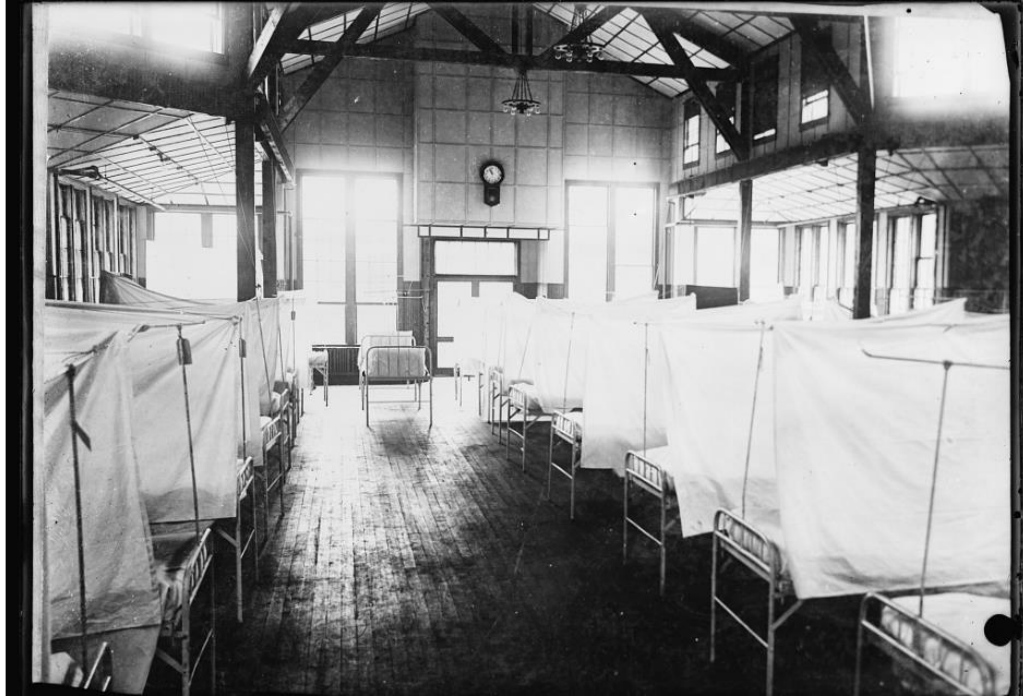
²⁷ "Possible Schools Will Be Closed," *Paterson Morning Call*, October 5, 1918.

²⁸ "Close Courts to Aid on Influenza," *Paterson Evening News*, October 8, 1918.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ "Late Reports Pile Up," "Flu Cases Today," *Paterson Evening News*, October 10, 1918.

³¹ "Y.M.H.A. to be in the Parade," *Paterson Evening News*, October 8, 1918.



Interior of Red Cross House at U.S. General Hospital #16, New Haven, Connecticut, 1918. Courtesy Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/anrc.02679/>.

The reported illnesses were all over the place, but by October 12 there were 2,800 cases of flu in the city of Paterson.³² A few days later there were 4,000 cases and 53 reported deaths.³³ By the time cases hit 5,000 on October 18, health board officials reminded people to seek medical help even if it seemed like they had a common cold.³⁵ It could soon become what experts called “grippe,” another name for influenza.

At this point, the city’s doctors were overwhelmed. The *Paterson Evening News* reported that many physicians had temporarily closed their offices to devote more time to those stricken with influenza.³⁶ City health officials also inspected the homes of infected persons to determine if their living quarters were adequate for quarantine and would prevent the spread of influenza to

³² “State Health Officers Aid Fight on ‘Flu,’” *Paterson Evening News*, October 12, 1918.

³³ “Influenza on the Decrease Reports Show,” *Paterson Evening News*, October 14, 1918.

³⁴ “Report 100 New Cases as ‘Flu’ Slackens,” *Paterson Evening News*, October 15, 1918.

³⁵ “[Sic] Now Believed Under Control,” *Paterson Evening News*, October 18, 1918.

³⁶ “Health Men See Epidemic Held in Check,” *Paterson Evening News*, October 17, 1918.

family members.³⁷ The local Women's Club acknowledged the city's health system crisis by preparing and sending several student nurses to assist physicians in the city who were overworked by the flu's rampage.³⁸

However, not everyone wanted to follow the shutdown guidelines, which encouraged state health officials from Trenton to visit Paterson and other cities in a statewide campaign to ensure the public-gathering ban was obeyed and enforced. Acting Police Chief William E. Perry began to crack down on any citizens who failed to comply with the ban, namely, saloon owners.³⁹ "A saloonkeeper arrested is liable to have his stock confiscated, fined \$100 and his license revoked for one year," according to the *Paterson Evening News*. Chief Perry made it clear to all violating business owners in the city that their apathy for public health would be met with fury.⁴⁰

Without governmental programs such as today's loans for businesses to keep staff employed, the economy was hard hit. Small business owners and workers alike suffered during the Spanish flu pandemic. On October 21, a conference between local theater owners and the local health board commenced; Charles L. Dooley complained that approximately 300 employees had been laid off and the wealth of theater owners had rapidly diminished due to the public-gathering ban. In response, Dr. Neer assured business owners that if the number of cases per day stayed low, the ban could be lifted by the end of the week.⁴¹

A few things worked in the favor of eradicating the flu in Paterson. The quarantines and shutterings worked. The cold weather may also have played a part.⁴² The business closures continued for a few days, despite efforts to reopen. Officials justified their decision with the

³⁷ "24 New Cases of Influenza," *Paterson Evening News*, October 2, 1918.

³⁸ "Report 100 New Cases as 'Flu' Slackens," *Paterson Evening News*, October 15, 1918.

³⁹ "Police to Watch Saloonkeepers," *Paterson Evening News*, October 12, 1918.

⁴⁰ "State Health Officers Aid Fight on 'Flu,'" *Paterson Evening News*, October 12, 1918.

⁴¹ "Remove Bans on Theaters Thursday," *Paterson Evening News*, October 21, 1918.

⁴² "Quarantine at Dix Is Lifted," "Await State Action on 'Flu,'" *Paterson Evening News*, October 22, 1918.

continuing high numbers of flu cases. By October 25, businesses resumed normal business hours in Paterson.⁴³

But things would not truly be normal, not for a long time. A report out of London in December estimated the worldwide death toll from influenza to be 6 million.⁴⁴ The true number, according to the National Archives and Records Administration, was more like 50 million.⁴⁵ The scare of the illness and the many loved ones lost remained with survivors for a long time.

Ben Mahwhinney, the naval officer at Camp Dix, ended up surviving the disease. It may have weakened his health, however. He lived just another 16 years.⁴⁶ Ben's name now lies in the halls of infamy as one of the first people to not only contract the Spanish flu in New Jersey, but to also beat it.

Fazli Hida is a history student at William Paterson University, and Veronica MacDonald Ditko is an author and researcher, and secretary of the Hawthorne Historical Society. Mr. Hida was an intern for the society in 2021. The society will work with students of any age who are interested in local history and sharing their findings with others. Reach out for more information. Ms. MacDonald Ditko is happy to speak with anyone interested in discussing her experience working with interns, and how others might work with them throughout the state.

⁴³ "Health Men Go to Trenton to Have Ban Lifted Tomorrow," *Paterson Evening News*, October 23, 1918; "Continue Ban Until Danger Point Passes," *Paterson Evening News*, October 24, 1918; "Ban on Public Places Lifted by Health Board Today," *Paterson Evening News*, October 25, 1918.

⁴⁴ "War Toll 20,000,000; 6,000,000 Died in 3 Months of Influenza," *Paterson Evening News*, December 20, 1918.

⁴⁵ "The Deadly Virus: The influenza epidemic of 1918," National Archives and Records Administration, <https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/influenza-epidemic/>. Accessed October 4, 2021.

⁴⁶ "Benjamin Harrison Mawhinney (17 Sep 1888–31 Aug 1935)," Find a Grave, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/88857452/benjamin-harrison-mawhinney>. Accessed February 18, 2022. "United States Census, 1930," FamilySearch, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:X4FF-YMK>. Accessed February 19, 2022. "Benjamin Mawhinney, Paterson, Passaic, New Jersey, United States," citing enumeration district (ED) ED 5, sheet 20A, line 1, family 441, NARA microfilm publication T626 (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, 2002), roll 1378, FHL microfilm 2,341,113.

This article was made possible through the support of the Hawthorne Historical Society and the internship program at William Paterson University. The Hawthorne Historical Society's mission is to acquire, preserve, and disseminate knowledge and artifacts about the history of the borough. As Hawthorne approaches its 125th anniversary in 2023, the society is doubling its efforts to share its historical knowledge in innovative ways. The Hawthorne Historical Society is a 501(c)3 charitable organization. Visit us at <http://hawthornehistory.org/> or @hawthornehistory on Facebook.